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Ex-Saigon Official Tells of 'Re-education' by Hanoi

The writer of the following dispatch is a former Times correspondent who is writing a book on the Vietnam War.

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Special to The New York Times

VAN NUYS, Calif. — A former South Vietnamese Army officer and official who spent four years in Vietnam under the Communists, more than half of them in a "re-education camp" and prisons, says the Hanoi leadership undertook an unprecedented experiment to convert and reconcile its former opponents because it had decided not to liquidate them.

American Presidents had predicted for decades that a Communist military victory in South Vietnam would result in mass liquidation of Hanoi's opponents. The prediction of a blood bath had been one of the abiding justifications for continuing the war.

"There was no blood bath," as many feared would occur after a Communist takeover, said the former official, Tran Ngoc Chau. There have been some trials and long prison terms have been handed out, he said, but he said he did not know of a single person on the South Vietnamese side who had been executed for acts committed during the war.

The predictions of slaughter were not without apparent foundation. As many as 15,000 people may have perished in the turmoil of a land-reform campaign the Communists started after the French surrendered North Vietnam to them in the Geneva Agreements of 1954. They massacred 3,000 people in Hue, Mr. Chau's birthplace and the former imperial capital in central Vietnam, after seizing the city during their 1968 Tet, or Lunar New Year, offensive. Two hundred thousand to a million Vietnamese might be killed in the blood bath that would follow a Communist victory in South Vietnam. Defense Secretary James R. Schlesinger had warned in Congressional testimony two weeks before a helicopter lifted the last of the United States marines from the embassy roof in Saigon.

In an interview in Van Nuys, the Los Angeles suburb where he and his family are living as refugees, Mr. Chau spoke of his personal experience of life in the camps. Tens of thousands, possibly more than 100,000, he said, remain confined because the authorities are still afraid or unwilling to release them.

In mid-June, 1975, Mr. Chau was taken to the main camp for civilian members of what the Communists called the "puppet administration" of Nguyen Van Thieu, at Long Thanh in the old French rubber plantation country 18 miles west of Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon. The camp was an extensive compound of one-room brick buildings with sheet-metal roofs that served as barracks for the prisoners.

The "students," as the Communist staff referred to their charges, slept on bare concrete floors. The staff members were called "cadres," an all-purpose term the Communists use for any military officer or civilian official. No one had thought to bring a woven-reed sleeping mat; they had been advised to pack lightly because they would complete the course and be sent back to their families in 30 days.

Mr. Chau had brought an extra shirt and slacks, a pair of pajamas and sandals, a couple of changes of underwear and toilet articles in an overnight bag. But when masons started to erect a 10-foot wall around the entire compound, topped with barbed wire, they realized their stay might well be longer.

Stenographers to Colonels

There were about 3,500 people confined in the camp at the outset, ranging from stenographers in the Central Intelligence Organization, South Vietnam's equivalent of the Central Intelligence Agency, to police colonels, province chiefs, judges, former congressmen like Mr. Chau, senators, ambassadors and Cabinet officials.

Function rather than organization determined whether one went to this civilian camp, run by Hanoi's Ministry of the Interior, or to one of the military re-education camps administered by the Vietnam People's Army. Most of the district and province chiefs in Mr. Chau's camp, for example, had also been career army officers.

Those who were sent to the camp were from every agency and organization that had opposed the Communists, whether official or not. The Government officials began with deputy district chiefs; the police with lieutenants; the anti-Communist political party members with district leaders. And everyone from the intelligence services had to come, which accounted for the disproportionate number of stenographers among the women. They had all been "loyal servants of the American imperialists," the Communists explained.

However, the staff apparently decided that the loyalty of stenographers to their former employers was limited, because the camp's female population of 400 fell drastically after the first month.

Key From Paris Hotel

One of the men in Mr. Chau's barracks of 150 still had the key to his Paris hotel room. A former staff employee of the National Assembly, he had been working for the United Nations in France and had rushed back to Saigon to retrieve his family, only to be trapped when the airlines halted their flights. Occasionally in the camp he would take the key out of his overnight bag and look at it.

He was one of three men in Mr. Chau's barracks who died; he and a second man succumbed to dysentery that would not respond to antibiotics. The third man was a judge who committed suicide with sleeping pills.

Having a relative in the Communist Party did not provide a means of escaping from "re-education." Indeed, it had the opposite effect, because the relative felt obliged to prove that he or she was above being influenced by family ties. Mr. Chau, in addition to an older brother who is a senior intelligence officer, had another older brother who was an English-language scholar in Hanoi, and a brother-in-law, the last two of whom had been party members since the 1940's.

"You people look down on those who work with their hands," the officials announced as soon as everyone had been assigned to a barracks. "Now you will learn that there is nothing dishonorable about labor. In our society, everyone has to work, beginning with the leaders."

Men Worked 10-Hour Days

Male inmates in the camp were put to work at 10-hour days for the next month, while women were given lighter tasks. The men cleared away brush and weeds that had overgrown the compound, dug latrines and planted vegetable gardens to help feed themselves, having to devise their own tools to do so. The younger men, the army officers who had been deputy district chiefs and the police lieutenants, made crude scythes and shovels out of galvanized steel roofing.

Mr. Chau did not mind the hard labor. He was 51 years old in 1975, but he is a lithe man with taut features and dark-brown eyes that turn intense when he is making a point. He had lost his mental objections to manual work during his four years in the Viet Minh and was also fit from the hour of yoga exerciss he had learned to do every day to pass the four and a half years he spent in Saigon's Chi Hoa Prison under President Nguyen Van Thieu.

He noticed that the officials also worked, repairing their quarters in a pagoda across the road and planting their own gardens. "They got into the habit in the jungle and they kept it up," he said. He remembered that Ho Chi Minh used to cultivate a garden as an example.

The cadres dressed with the austerity that Mr. Chau recalled being forced upon him and his former Viet Minh comrades in the rain forest. They wore loose-fitting cotton shirts and trousers and dispensed with socks and shoes for footwear known as Ho Chi Minh sandals that were cut from old tires.

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Made to Write 'Confessions'

After the compound was neat and the gardens planted, the prisoners were made to write so-called confessions. Teams of cadres appeared in every barracks to hand out ballpoint pens and an ample supply of the legal-size mimeograph paper that the Saigon Government had used for military orders and official pronouncements. United States aid had paid for both items.

"You are going to write your biography," a senior official said at the outset of his briefing to the inmates. He outlined how the confession was to begin, with an account of one's class background and parents, proceeding in a narrative from childhood until 1975. All major relationships with Americans were to be described in detail.

In explaining that the confession was to recount all significant "crimes," the official said that he did not simply mean the acts of corruption and abuse that were so common on the Saigon side. The point was to understand how one had been manipulated by the "American imperialists" to work against the interests of one's own country.

A provincial governor, for example, had committed a major "crime against the people" in battling the local guerrillas to pacify his province, it was explained, because he had been seeking to destroy the revolution and the party. Any act against the Communists and their adherents was a "crime," large or small, depending on its nature, because the party was one and the same with the people and the revolution.

Two-Month Ordeal

The next two months, spent writing their confessions and publicly discussing their "crimes" in group sessions, was probably the worst time in the camp for most of the prisoners. All work was suspended except for such essential tasks as cleaning latrines and watering the gardens. The ordeal went on morning and afternoon and into the evening, with breaks only for meals and exercise. Half of the men in Mr. Chau's barracks of 150 had to write their confessions a second time, reexamining episodes on which they had not satisfied their warders or adding supplementary material on demand. A quarter of the men had to work on their confessions a third time. Mr. Chau got by with writing his twice.

The cadres always had an answer when an inmate announced that he felt no guilt. "I didn't do anything wrong," an older physician in the barracks said one day. He had been an obstetrician in the army before transferring to the Ministry of Health. "Look, I got out of medical school and they took me into the army and put me to work at the Cong Hoa Hospital," the main military hospital in Saigon, "delivering the babies of the officers' wives. I was promoted to captain. I kept delivering babies and after some years I was promoted to major. Finally I made lieutenant colonel, still delivering the babies of the officers' wives. What did I do wrong?"

A cadre answered that in giving the officers' wives the services of a professional physician, the doctor was helping to grant a privilege that was not available to poor Vietnamese women or to the wives of ordinary soldiers, who usually had to make do with midwives. "You encouraged young men to become officers in the puppet army so that their wives could enjoy special medical care," the cadre said.

Having to relive their lives in such grim conditions and to declare that those lives had been wasted and criminal ones was more than some of the men could bear. About 15 in Mr. Chau's barracks suffered hallucinations and breakdowns, some falling into catatonic silences. They were led away to some other building in the camp, though all but a couple eventually returned.

As the two months of confessions ended and the confinement settled into 11 more miserable months of work, political reading and lectures, with group discussions in the evenings, Mr. Chau was struck by the self-discipline and patience of these jailers who professed to be teachers. In their unhappiness some of the men fought back by taunting the cadres during the group sessions or deliberately violated rules on neatness and work to irritate them.

Mr. Chau expected the offenders to be beaten into submission, but the cadres never went beyond shouting, he said. Two of them broke their own rules to carry letters to the families of sick men who needed medicine. They refused to accept money from the families and would not take letters for men in good health.

Mr. Chau's younger brother, who had been a major in the army, told him later that the cadre members who ran the military camps sometimes abused their prisoners. Officers who misbehaved were beaten, he reported, and several who were caught attempting to escape were shot in front of their fellow prisoners.

Convinced It Was a Charade

Mr. Chau assumed at the time, however, that all the relative good will was a cruel and perverse charade. He had read Boris Pasternak's "Doctor Zhivago" and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's "The Gulag Archipelago." He was convinced that in the end his captors would drop the mask and show that they were the same Communists as their Soviet "socialist brothers." They would smile and put a bullet into the back of everyone's head or ship them to concentration camps in the north from which they would never return.

Mr. Chau's conviction that he and most others on the losing side were doomed was reinforced by his personal position. Hanoi's counter-intelligence officers were also given to assumptions. They assumed that the Americans would not abandon a man like Mr. Chau as they had their less august collaborators. His imprisonment by President Thieu they saw as an elaborate charade. They believed that Mr. Chau was a high-level agent left behind by the C.I.A. to foment dissidence.

He was interrogated regularly during his 14 months at Long Thanh. After another eight months in a prison in the suburb of Thu Duc that had held women political prisoners in the years of the American presence, he was taken to a compound of white buildings in central Saigon that had been the headquarters of the Saigon Government's police forces. For two months he was held in cells in which Communist revolutionaries had been confined. He sat on a hard wooden chair in the same rooms in which they had been interrogated and tortured while new interrogators led him back over every one of his real or presumed C.I.A. relationships, trying to trip him up. He was not tortured or beaten. An interrogator, with the remark that "The Americans built this place," reminded him of the irony one day. When he was told on the morning of July 7, 1977, after two years and 20 days, that his ordeal was over, he did not believe it until he saw his family waiting for him at the gate.

More than a million people in South Vietnam have been forced to undergo "re-education" since the Communist victory, most of them soldiers who attended classes in their neighborhoods or hamlets. The Hanoi authorities told Amnesty International in 1977 that they were still holding 50,000 people in the camps. Other figures given to visiting foreigners over the last two years indicate that the camp population could be about 100,000. Mr. Chau does not know how many remain. There could be as many as 200,000, he said.

The hundreds of thousands who have been released are an untrusted minority of second-class citizens, he said. The Communist leadership lacks the means to provide most of them with jobs even if it wished to do so.

Mr. Chau says that the effort to repopulate ricelands emptied by American bombing and shelling during the war, the so-called New Economic Zones, is failing because the authorities do not have enough seed rice, tools and other essentials like mosquito netting and medicine to enable the settlers to make a beginning. Those who have fled back to Saigon sleep on the sidewalks at night ignored by the police. "There are too many of them and the police try to be human," Mr. Chau said.

Mr. Chau doubts that many minds were fundamentally changed by Hanoi's alternative to liquidation. His was not, he says.

Hanoi's counter-intelligence officers, he was convinced, released him in the hope that he would lead them to others. He felt that if he did not escape they would sooner or later execute him or imprison him for life, "if only to ease their worry." He fled by buying papers falsely identifying him as an ethnic Chinese and purchased passage for his wife, himself and five of their children on one of the boats full of Chinese refugees that the Communists began driving out to sea in 1978.

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Borrowed Money for Passages

A generous friend who did not want to leave lent him the passage price for seven people in sheets of gold bullion, worth about $9,000 per person at the current market value. Mr. Chau and his family spent Christmas in a bare apartment in California. At the moment he needs a job that will produce enough to furnish the apartment and support his family, but he says he intends to repay the loan somehow, some day. "Sixty-three thousand dollars is a cheap price to pay for freedom," he said. One daughter, who had been permitted to finish her studies at the Saigon University medical school after 1975 and who was working as a doctor in a provincial hospital, chose to stay in Vietnam. She and her husband, also a doctor, lost their jobs in retribution for Mr. Chau's escape, but he hopes they will soon be allowed to work again.

Mr. Chau says that the contrast between the brutality of letting so many Chinese perish at sea and the way he was handled was the result of miscalculation and then desperation or callousness toward an ethnic minority by the Hanoi leadership. The Communists had originally intended to expel only the rich Chinese, whose businesses they had seized to break the merchants' stranglehold over the economy of the south. The authorities had assured other Chinese residents that they had nothing to fear because they were members of the "worker-peasant class." It turned out, however, that many of the Chinese-owned businesses and factories had employed Chinese workers, excluding the Vietnamese.

As the wealthy Chinese began to leave, many of the less fortunate fled with them. Mr. Chau says that when the Communists realized that their appeal to class differences was insufficient to overcome ethnic and economic ties, and the troubles with China worsened into war, Hanoi feared that the entire Chinese community, which numbered about 1.2 million, might turn into a fifth column. Hanoi further miscalculated the dimensions of the exodus as people of Vietnamese stock like Mr. Chau and his family bought places on the ships and the Communist leaders were then either too desperate or too callous to stop the flight until it was too late.

Some Views Have Changed

Mr. Chau has changed his view of Ho Chi Minh's heirs in some respects. "First they are nationalists, then they are Communists," he said. "We must admit that."

He believes that the old revolutionaries in Hanoi decided they had to avoid a blood bath in the south. They saw that atrocities committed in the name of the land-reform campaign, and the Hue massacre, were not worth the cost in lasting rancor. If they killed hundreds of thousands of their former opponents in the south they would divide the Vietnamese more than they had already been divided by the 30 years of war against France and the United States. The enduring hatred from the families of the victims would make it even more difficult for the Communists to unify the country and construct the new society they say they want to build south of the 17th parallel.

The old men in Hanoi also realize that they can afford to let their former opponents live, Mr. Chau says. They understand the mentality of the peasants who followed them. Ho Chi Minh's heirs know that in the country's hamlets those Vietnamese who fought with them against the foreigners will always look down on those who did not.

Mr. Chau read "Doctor Zhivago" and "The Gulag Archipelago" over again after his release. He says he was wrong to think that all Communists were the same and that the Vietnamese Communist mimicked the Russians.

"They are Vietnamese," he said. "It is in the Vietnamese moral tradition to show grace to the defeated. When the Mongols and the Chinese invaded our country, our ancestors fed the survivors and gave them horses to ride home."

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